Accept No Intolerance
Helping Students Respect, Embrace Differences

By Kathy Checkley

Intolerance, sometimes taken to a violent extreme, has always been part of the American experience. Deep-rooted prejudices present often perplexing, and at times alarming, civic challenges.

Schools have always been vulnerable to this societal dilemma, and students have been and continue to be the victims of bias related incidents. Nonetheless, educators affirm that schools are where change can begin. Administrators, students, and teachers can work together to check intolerance in at least three important ways: by incorporating an anti-bias focus into the school's mission; by ensuring that school policies and the law are consistently enforced; and by incorporating diversity issues into the curriculum.

What We Believe

Start by "defining community in the school," suggests Jim Carnes, director of Teaching Tolerance (see Resources). Using basic democratic principles as a guide, administrators, faculty, and students can envision an environment in which every child is welcome and where, as Carnes puts it, "nothing about a child's identity can compromise his or her belonging in the community."

The school community needs to "figure out their values and mission," agrees Scott Hirschfeld, education director for the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). In so doing, "you have an anchor…a core set of beliefs." Then, when consensus has been reached, faculty, staff, and students can establish rules and regulations that "ground the school in an ethos of social equity," says Hirschfeld. Those policies become "the touchstone" to which everyone can return when "expressions of intolerance occur" adds Carnes. And such incidents will inevitably occur, say experts. Consider, for example, this case: A high school principal learns that a student has drawn a swastika and written "Kill the Jews" in permanent marker near some lockers. What should the principal do?

First, have the police examine the graffiti, says Stephen Wessler, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Hate Violence at the University of Southern Maine. Students who deface lockers can be prosecuted for damaging property or committing a hate crime. After police have proof of the graffiti, get rid of it. Once that's done, he states, the principal should hold a school assembly and remind students and staff that such conduct won't be tolerated.

The key, Wessler maintains, is to treat the incident "as something significant." Ignoring the problem can lead to bigger problems. "News of graffiti and other acts of bias spreads quickly to members of the targeted group. "Doing nothing, he warns, "gives the impression that you don't care." Carnes agrees and points out that if the school has "activist" policies about respect in place, such an incident can be used to reinforce the school's collective ideals. "If a school has defined itself as a place of positive opportunity for all," he observes, then the principal, the faculty, and students "have a structure for responding in ways that reassure the threatened or victimized groups." The school, for example, could use the incident as a springboard for reassessing the effectiveness of it's anti-bias efforts or to evaluate how all groups in the school are faring, thereby determining "who is feeling part of the community and who is not." By taking such action, Carnes asserts, schools do not have to be defined by incidents of bias.

We Are What We Do

School communities that want to be defined by fairness should remember that students can be

powerful activists for social justice, adds Hirschfeld, who notes that students seldom fail "to speak and act in good ways" when given a chance.

At a middle school in Maine for example, a student-led civil rights team invites other students to a screening of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When the movie ends, the students discuss how the film addresses the themes of racism and respect. They then brain-storm ways to promote respect for every person in the school.

At a high school in California, student members of the school's gay-straight alliance work with a history teacher to organize a half-day staff development activity. The workshop is designed to build awareness about the reality of daily life for gay and lesbian students at the school and to motivate teachers to consider how they can support these students.

Students must learn how to take action, Hirschfeld asserts. Teachers should ask students to write letters or to make telephone calls to elected officials, he says.

"These are powerful experiences that help students feel empowered" to change laws and attitudes that may be hostile to some groups of people.

These activities also help to instill "a predisposition toward tolerance" in students, states Kathy Kelly, parent liaison in the Office of Community and Parent Relations for the Baltimore County (Md.) Public Schools. Students "can't learn about every culture," she notes, but if they have the right attitude, they'll "find out what needs to be done to help all students feel at home at school."

We Are What We Know

Teaching students to be more accepting of differences must begin early, experts say. According to the Anti-Defamation League's book *Hate Hurts*, all children note differences and begin to form opinions about those differences early in life. Educators, maintains Carnes, "are in a position to make sure students don't attach negative meanings to the differences" they discover.

For younger children, positive approaches to dealing with diversity are made clear through modeling, states Howard Knoff, professor of school psychology at the University of South Florida. Knoff also directs Project ACHIEVE, which helps teachers teach students interpersonal, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills (*see Resources*). In the process of implementing the program, Knoff has found that "younger kids form attitudes through behaviors." Because tolerance is an idea that's "too conceptual for young children," a teacher must instead *show* what it means to tolerate differences. Teaching appropriate behaviors helps form the attitudes that "will guide how students eventually conduct themselves," Knoff explains. And start as early as preschool, he suggests, because "it's difficult to establish those behaviors later."

Hirschfeld agrees. Research shows that acts of intolerance such as name-calling and bullying start in grade school and escalate. In most cases these incidents result from "a lack of exposure and education." Differences, he asserts, "should be treated as a normal topic of discussion."

In keeping with this assertion, Hirschfeld made sure to regularly talk about gay and lesbian issues with his 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students in New York. "The first time I included the issue, there was some giggling and parents were uncertain," he recalls. "But by the end of the school year, students and parents felt a tremendous comfort level. Once the word 'gay' was said, once it was treated as a normal subject, discomfort melted way."

"Incorporating lesbian and gay issues into lessons should be part of an effort to create a curriculum that reflects our reality without blinders or prejudice," states Annie Johnston, a history teacher at Berkeley (Calif.) High School. The real challenge, she observes, is to integrate

such issue "in more than token ways." Lesbian and gay issues, gender issues, and racial issues "must be embedded throughout the curriculum," in English, social studies, science and even math, she states.

Incorporating multicultural issues into content areas, for example, helps children explore a wide variety of issues from a variety of perspectives. When a high school algebra teacher encourages her class to discuss math concepts via e-mail with students in other countries, they learn that mathematics is a universal language. And when the scientific achievements of women and minorities are regularly included in the curriculum children discover all cultural groups have made significant contributions to civilization.

It's simply about giving students the depth of exposure they'll need to deal with and understand all the people they'll encounter in the real world, Hirschfeld says.

Ever Vigilant

Teaching tolerance does work, Carnes affirms. Still, he reminds educators that there are no solutions that "put the matter to rest." As he writes in his book *Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America*," ethnic jokes, anti-gay graffiti, barriers to the handicapped - even the smallest denial of a person's rights and dignity can plant the seeds of injustice and hate."

Educators, he maintains, must always help students understand "the cumulative effect of bracketing people in the category of *other*."

Kathy Kelly agrees. "People need to understand that inclusion means everybody," she says. Teachers must protect all of their students. "We have to always remind students that it's not okay to say certain things or to act in certain ways."

Teachers must also continually work on maintaining a nurturing, positive, and accepting climate in the classroom, Kelly states. If the classroom has a positive climate "where kids can tell their own stories," then teachers can help students "explode stereotypes." We have to change fundamental belief systems, Kelly affirms. "Ultimately, we have to get tolerance into our hearts."

Resources

The Teaching Tolerance project provides classroom resources to help teachers foster unity, respect, and equality in the classroom. On the Web at http://www.splenter.org/teachingtolerance.

Project ACHIEVE features the *Stop and Think Social Skills* curriculum. Contact Howard Knoff at knoff@tempest.coedu.usf.edu for information.

The GLSEN Lunchbox is a comprehensive training program for ending anti-gay bias in schools. Call 800-247-6553. Excerpts from ***Hate Hurts*** are on the Web: www.adl.org/frames/front_ctboh.html.